

VZCZCXRO1107
PP RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHDA RUEHDBU RUEHDF RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHLN
RUEHLZ RUEHNP RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHRS RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHIK #0023/01 1060552
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P R 160552Z APR 09
FM AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0441
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHIK/AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI 0484

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 THESSALONIKI 000023

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/SE, EUR/OHI

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [GR](#)
SUBJECT: THESSALONIKI: SUBWAY CONSTRUCTION CONTINUES NEAR OLD JEWISH
CEMETERY; PROGRESS ON RESTITUTION NEGOTIATIONS

REF: A. 07 THESSALONIKI 060; B. 08 THESSALONIKI 87

THESSALONI 00000023 001.2 OF 002

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: During an April 1 visit to Thessaloniki, Ambassador J. Christian Kennedy, Special Envoy for the Office of Holocaust Issues, visited a subway construction site at the edge of the old Jewish cemetery that has attracted the attention of American and European Rabbis. The head of metro construction told Ambassador Kennedy that current and planned excavation was outside of the cemetery boundaries and that workers had uncovered no graves or human remains at the site. While the exact border of the cemetery (destroyed during the Nazi occupation) is unclear, Post estimates that some of the construction is likely inside the border, based on current landmarks and a GoG 1998 map (Refs). The local Jewish community reaffirmed that it was not trying to stop or monitor closely the excavation, focusing instead on restitution negotiations, which appear to be moving forward, albeit slowly. Kennedy suggested the community urge the GoG to reach a settlement prior to the Prague Conference on "Holocaust Era Assets" in June. The Director of Technical Services at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki informed Kennedy that there has been no progress towards erecting a plaque commemorating the old Jewish cemetery, on which the University is built. END SUMMARY.

UNIVERSITY SUBWAY EXCAVATION APPEARS TO BE INSIDE THE
CEMETERY

2. (SBU) On April 1, Ambassador Kennedy visited the University metro excavation site located near the old Jewish cemetery (Refs), accompanied by the President of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, David Saltiel, the managing director of the company overseeing metro construction, Evaggelos Galousis, and ConGen staff. When Kennedy expressed concern that some of the excavation and surface construction appeared to be inside or at least very close to the border of the old Jewish cemetery, Galousis replied that the metro work was outside of the cemetery and that workers had not found any graves or human remains at the site. The local supervisor of GoG Archaeological Service monitoring the construction corroborated this claim in a separate conversation with Post. Kennedy urged that metro authorities do a survey of the site to determine whether metro construction was taking place or being planned within the old cemetery, including three ventilation shafts of about 35 square meters each, which have appeared on the plans only recently. Post's best estimates, using Google Earth and a 1998 map of the cemetery commissioned by the Greek government, place some of the digging and construction, including for the ventilation shafts, just inside the (no longer visible) old cemetery boundary.

RESTITUTION NEGOTIATIONS MOVING FORWARD, SLOWLY

3. (SBU) Members of the board of the local Jewish

community told Kennedy they were not trying to stop the excavation nor following the metro construction closely. They were not sure if some of the construction was taking place inside the old cemetery boundaries. Rabbi Sheetrit expressed some frustration about occasional bureaucratic delays in gaining access to the site, but was otherwise satisfied with cooperation between local authorities and the community. Jewish community president Saltiel noted the board was focused on efforts to reach a settlement with the GoG on compensation for cemetery land confiscated by Greece during the Nazi occupation. According to Saltiel, the president of the committee appointed by the Ministry of Finance to negotiate a settlement with the community informed him the GoG was preparing to offer a settlement (in the form of real estate) of about 17 million euros. Saltiel believes this is a fair amount, if somewhat lower than the market value of the confiscated land, and said the community would likely accept the deal if offered in writing. Kennedy pointed out that the June 26-30 Prague Conference on "Holocaust Era Assets," would be an excellent occasion for the GoG and community to announce a settlement on this longstanding restitution issue. [Note: Kennedy had made the same point to MFA and Finance Ministry officials in Athens the previous day (septel). End note] Saltiel said he would urge his GoG interlocutors to speed up efforts to reach a settlement with this target in mind. The board also expressed concern over the recent decision by a Greek appeals court to overturn the conviction of an extreme right author, Plevris, for inciting racial hatred with his book, which asserted, inter alia, that the Holocaust did not happen. Saltiel said he intended to write a letter to Greek MPs expressing concern about the disturbing implications of the court decision.

NO PROGRESS ON UNIVERSITY MEMORIAL TO OLD CEMETERY

14. (SBU) Nikos Manousaridis, Director of Technical Services at Aristotle University, which was built on top of the cemetery after World War II, told Kennedy there had been no progress made on the University's commitment to erect a plaque

THESSALONI 00000023 002.2 OF 002

on campus commemorating the cemetery. Manousaridis noted that the University had been in a state of turmoil for the past several months, including the December riots and an ongoing student protest that had prevented the head of the University, Rector Anastasios Manthos, from meeting with Kennedy. Manousaridis added he was not confident that University and Ministry of Education authorities would take the necessary steps to erect a plaque any time soon.

15. (SBU)COMMENT: While it is encouraging that the GoG is considering a land-swap settlement with the Jewish community for property confiscated over 60 years ago, the talks have broken down many times over the past four years and there are still many hurdles to clear before the deal is done. The GoG will have to identify appropriate land to offer the community and probably obtain parliamentary approval, which may be difficult in light of the GoG's bare one seat majority and recent scandals involving land swaps between the GoG and Orthodox Church officials. Post will continue to monitor the negotiations as well as metro construction developments.

YEE